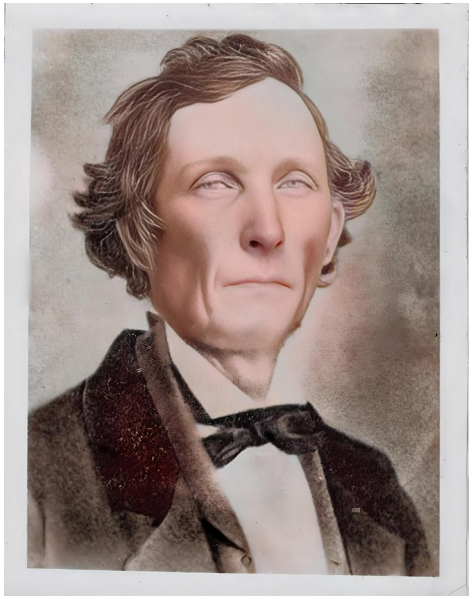


The Massacre of

the Nelson Buck Party

from Pontiac, Illinois

By: Dale C. Maley

1869 National News Story

Narrative

- Nelson Buck – Surveyor
- Took party of 12 boys age 16 and under to Nebraska to survey
- Party was “minding their own business” when all of a sudden the Sioux Indians murdered the whole party
- Only survivors were 2 young Pontiac boys sent back to the Army Fort to get help after party 1st saw Indians

Questions

- Who was Nelson Buck?
- Were the boys he hired all 16 and under?
- Who were the two survivors?
- Why did they go surveying in Nebraska Indian country with no fire-arms and no Military escort?
- Was it an unprovoked attack by the Sioux?

William Langdon Buck (1585-1658)
Margaret Grace Goode Neave (1585-1657)

To America in 1635

Emanuel (Enoch) Buck (1623-1706)
Sarah Riley (Ryley) (1625-1657)

Ezekiel Buck (1650-1713)
Rachel Beebe (1654-1713)

Enoch W. Buck (1683-1770)
Mary Beebe (1699-1769)

William S. Buck (1723-1799)
Deborah Farrand (1721-1785)

Sergeant Elijah Buck Sr. (1749-1830)
Margaret H. Foster (1750-1824)

Aholiab Buck (1776-1855)
Annie A. Drake (1778-1861)

Parents of Henry Buck

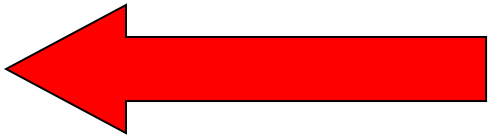
Unusual First Name

•Aholiab is a rather unusual first name. In the Bible, Aholiab was the son of Ahisamakh, of the tribe of Dan, worked under Bezalel as the deputy architect of the Tabernacle and the implements which it housed, including the Ark of the Covenant.

•He is described in Exodus 38:23 as a master of carpentry, weaving, and embroidery.

Family Tree of Aholiab Buck and Annie Drake

Child #	Name	Spouse #1	Spouse #2	Spouse #3
1	Abigail Buck (1803-1885)	Jacob Eaman (1805-1895)		
2	Margaret Buck (1805-1905)			
3	Nelson Buck (1808-1869)	Fidelia Wethey (1814-1833)	Annis Knapp (1812-1844)	Maria Tracy (1812-1909)
4	Charles A. Buck Sr. (1810-1884)	Eunice Stewart (1821-1905)		
5	Aaron K. Buck (1812-1912)			
6	John Foster Buck (1815-1901)	Mary Ann Schryder (1820-1910)		
7	Stephen D. Buck (1817-1899)			
8	Willard P. Buck (1833-1909)			
9	Corilla V. Buck (1834-unknown)			



- Nelson Buck was married 3 times

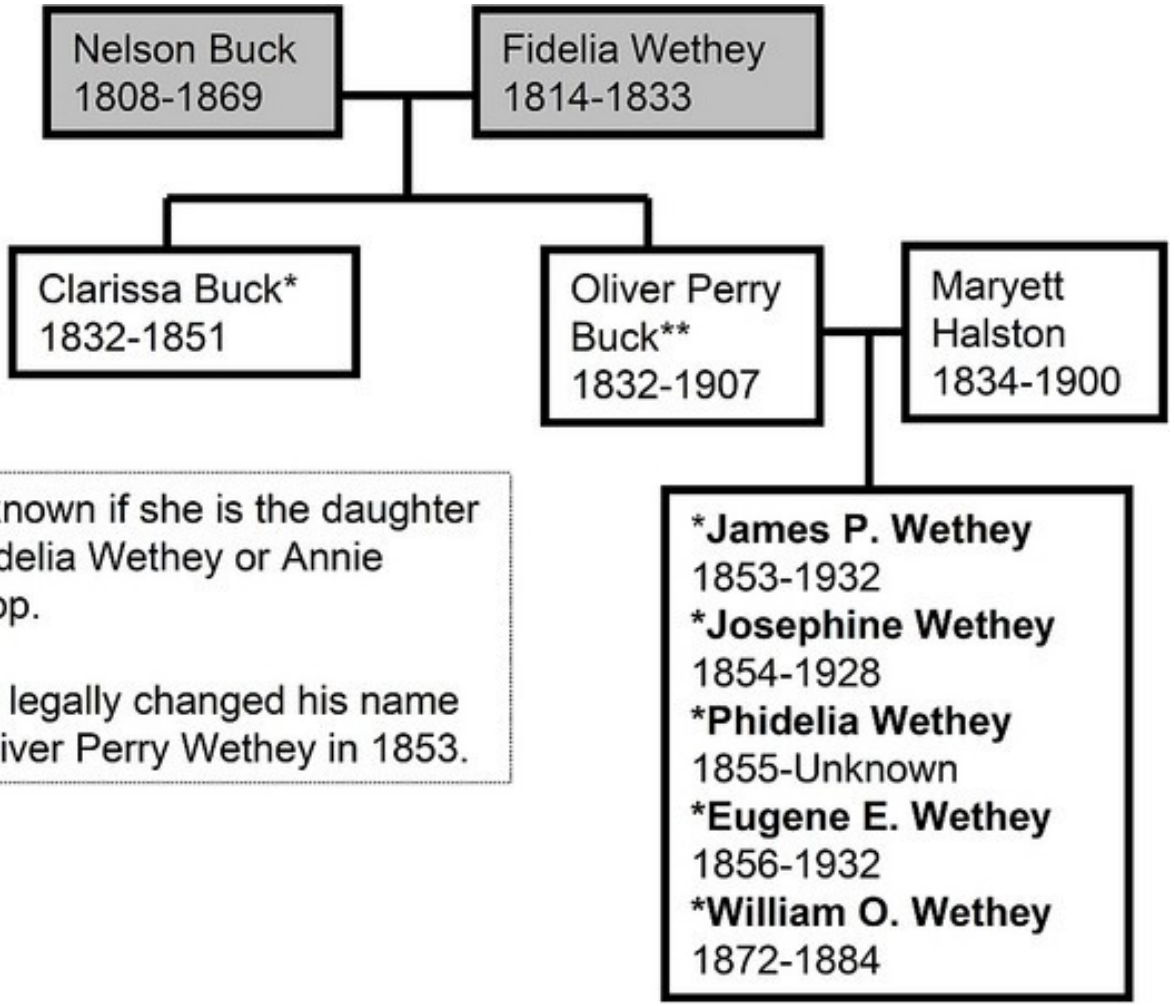
Aholiab Buck and Family Moved to Peoria ~1832

- Family was pioneer settlers in Peoria

- Nelson Buck married in New York about the time his parents moved to Peoria

- Unfortunately, Nelson Buck's young wife died

Family Tree of Nelson Buck and His First Wife



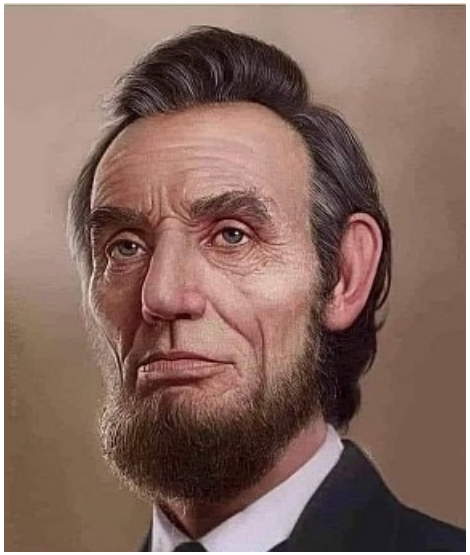
- Suspect Nelson Buck never knew he had 5 grandchildren in New York

Nelson Buck Opens 1st Nursey/Orchard in Bloomington

- He opened first nursery in Bloomington in 1833

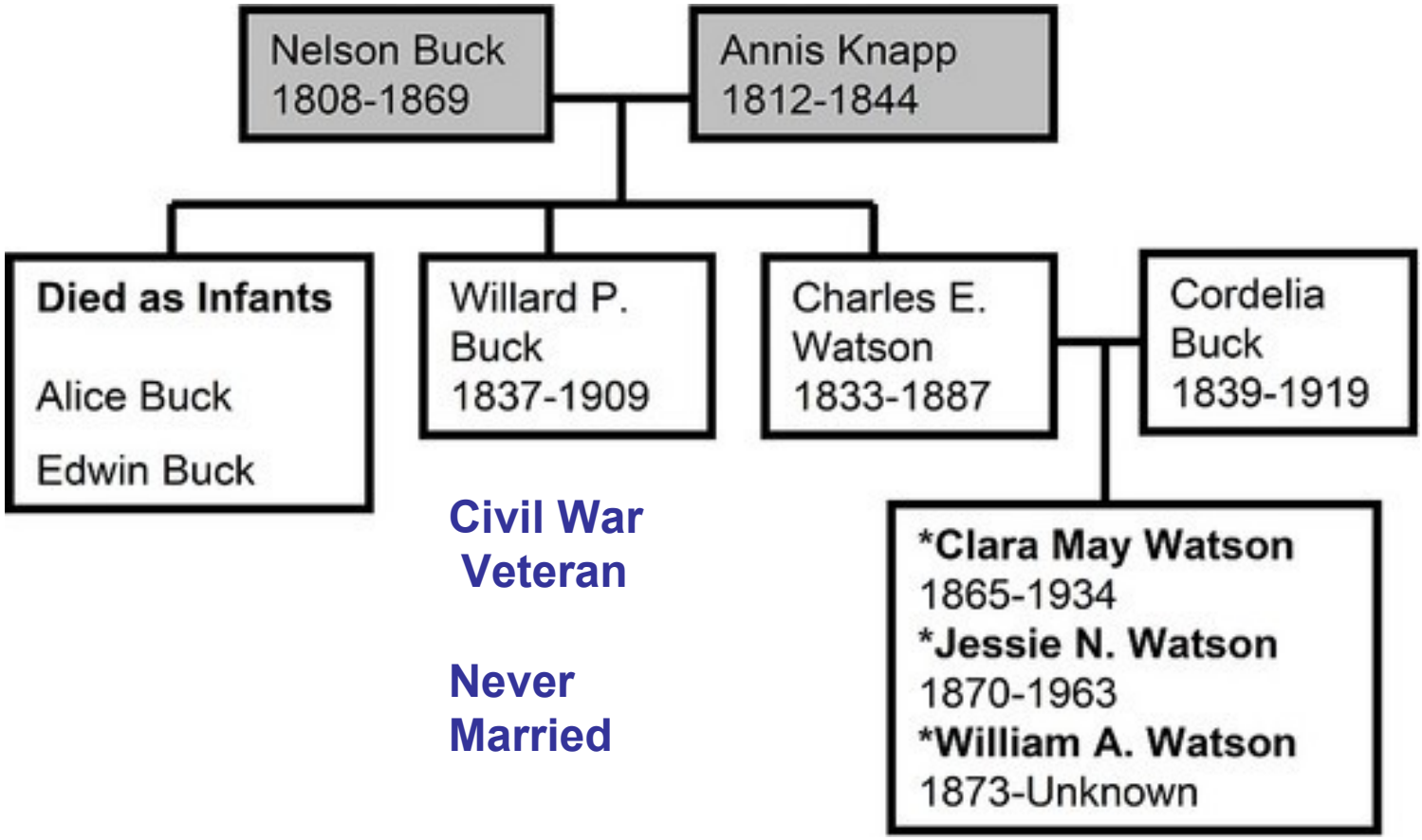
- Later ran Pantagraph ads for selling trees and plants

Abe Lincoln a Surveyor in 1833-1834



- Was a Surveyor for about 2 years
- Did surveying mostly around Springfield area
- Nelson Buck learned surveying around 1833 in Peoria
- Nelson Buck used dead Abraham Lincoln as a reference in 1868 when he applied for Nebraska surveying job
- Not sure how they knew each other?
- Nelson Buck was at a Surveyor's Convention where Lincoln spoke….maybe they met there ??

Nelson Buck Marries for a Second Time in 1834



Maria Tracy entry into the Nelson Buck Story

- Married Augustus Fellow (1796-1849) in New York
- Earliest Pontiac citizens, between 1840 & 1843
- He owned many lots in Pontiac
- Bad luck having children
  - -1843, daughter died at 5 months
  - -1844, daughter died age 6 years
  - -1845, son died shortly after birth
  - -1849, daughter died shortly after birth
- After losing 4 children, her husband died in 1849 when 53
- She was 47 when she became a widow

Nelson Buck's 2nd Wife died in 1844 at age of 31

- Nelson Buck was 35 when 2nd wife died

- Surviving Children:
  - -Willard (7)
  - -Cordelia (5)
  - -Clarissa (12)

1848 Pantagraph Nursery Ad

Central Nursery.

NOW is the time for those who wish to have good fruit to purchase the trees. At this establishment there is a good assortment of apple, pear and peach trees, and a few grape roots, &c., all of which will be sold on terms to accommodate purchasers. I expect to keep a hand constantly in the nursery to attend to calls, in this line.

NELSON BUCK

March 24, 1848 **21**

Livingston County Residents Travel Across Nebraska

- 1849
  - -William T. Stackpole (Fairbury real estate)
  - -Walked across Nebraska going to California Gold Rush in 1849. Returned via Nicarauga.
- 1849, 1852, 1859
  - -Judge Henry Jones made 3 trips across Nebraska to California [Jones House], moved to California
- 1865
  - -A. J. Cropsey Civil War hero (Fairbury)
  - -Lincoln, Nebraska real estate developer

Nelson Buck knew 3 men who survived Nebraska.

Nelson Buck Marries for 3rd time in 1850

•On November 14, 1850, Nelson Buck married Maria Tracy, the widow of Augustus Fellows, in Pontiac, Illinois.

•He was 42 and she was 38 when they married. Nelson and Maria Buck had no children.

•Nelson's children from previous marriage included thirteen year old Willard, eleven year old Cordelia, and 18 year old Clarissa.

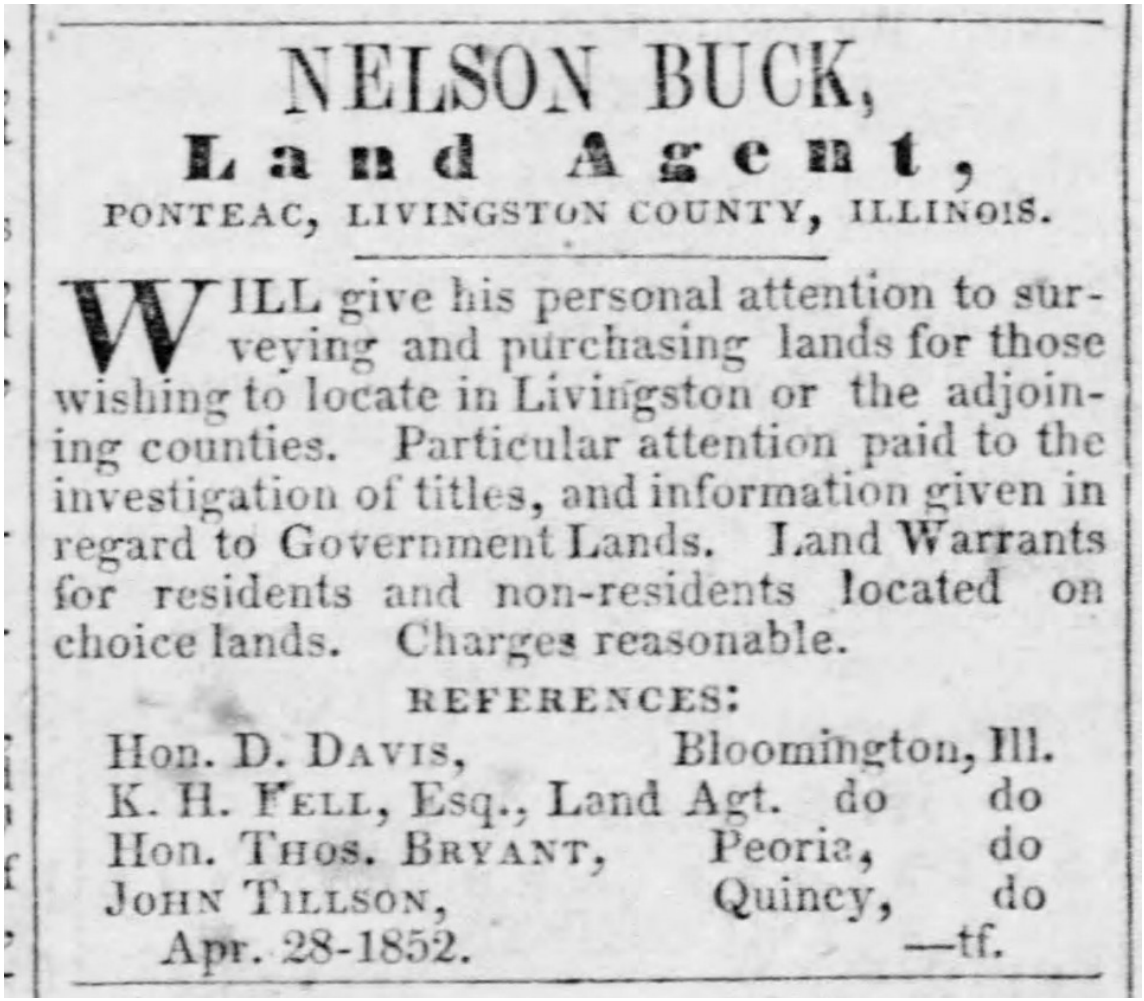
•Nelson Buck moved to Pontiac around 1850

Nelson Buck's Daughter Dies in 1850

- Clarissa Buck, daughter of Nelson Buck, died in Pontiac on July 18, 1851. She was only 19 years of age.

- Clarissa Buck was buried in Pontiac's Southside Cemetery with her sister Cordelia and Cordelia's husband.

1852 Pantagraph ad repeated in 1852 & 1853



NELSON BUCK,

Land Agent,

PONTEAC, LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS.

WILL give his personal attention to surveying and purchasing lands for those wishing to locate in Livingston or the adjoining counties. Particular attention paid to the investigation of titles, and information given in regard to Government Lands. Land Warrants for residents and non-residents located on choice lands. Charges reasonable.

REFERENCES:

Hon. D. DAVIS,	Bloomington,	Ill.
K. H. FELL, Esq., Land Agt.	do	do
Hon. THOS. BRYANT,	Peoria,	do
JOHN TILLSON,	Quincy,	do

Apr. 28-1852. —tf.

Big Legal Mess in Pontiac on Real Estate Owners in 1849

- Two Young Brothers settled in Pontiac
- Both Young brothers died before legal ownership
- Henry Weed entered their land in his name
- Isaac Fellows, brother-in-law to Young brothers
- Ownership changed to Henry Weed and Isaac Fellows
- Isaac Fellows died, left to son Augustus Fellows
- Henry Weed owned 50% of town, Augustus Fellows 50%
- Henry Weed died, left to his son and (2) son-in-laws
- August Fellows dies, widow married Nelson Buck

Big Legal Mess in Pontiac on Real Estate Owners in 1849

- Because of his surveying and land ownership experience, Nelson Buck helped to resolve the big legal controversy ~1853

- "Complete Title Abstracts" discontinued around 1968
  - -Give ownership history back to who bought land from U.S. Government

- Very confusing for oldest houses in Pontiac because of controversy

- 1853
  - -Mr. Buck lost election for County Surveyor
  - -Was involved with building new Vermilion River bridge
  - -Surveyed and laid out village of Dwight
- 1854
  - -Lost election again
- 1855
  - -Involved with banning sale of alcohol in Pontiac

•1856

-Chairman of 1st Board of Pontiac trustees

According to the 1878 history book, the village of Pontiac was incorporated under the general law of the State, February 12, 1856, by the election of a Board of Trustees, consisting of Nelson Buck, J. W. Strevell, S. C. Ladd, Z. H. Nettleton and H. Jones —the first named being chosen Chairman or President.

Jones House -> H. Jones

Strevell House -> Z. H. Nettleton & J. W. Strevell

•1856

-"Old Tavern" owned by Nelson Buck burned down

•1857

-Elected County Surveyor
-One mention of Nelson Buck being Postmaster

•1859

-Surveyed and laid out village of Chatsworth

•1861

-Civil War started
-Willard Buck (son of Nelson Buck) served in Union Army

•1863

-Surveyed and laid out Pontiac Southside Cemetery

•1864

-Daughter Cordelia Buck married Charles E. Watson in Pontiac

-Nelson Buck became Grandfather in 1864 at age 56

•1865

-Buck one of founders of Chicago & Paducah Railroad

-A. J. Cropsey, Fairbury Civil War hero, goes to Lincoln, Nebraska to be real estate developer

•1867

-Nebraska became a State

Life Stage of Nelson Buck in 1868

- Nelson Buck age 60
- Pioneer settler in Peoria, Bloomington, Pontiac
- Founding Fathers of Pontiac
- President of 1st Board of Trustees for Pontiac
- Elected County Surveyor several times
- Not much demand for surveyors, 1852 to 1860 was land rush
- 3 years since Civil War ended in 1865
- 3 more years until Custer's Last stand in 1876
- Enjoyed 1st grandchild, 2 more would be born soon
- Son Willard moved to Michigan
- Had 2 brothers and sister living in Kansas/Nebraska

Life Stage of Nelson Buck in 1868

- Nebraska became state 1 year earlier (1867)
- Great demand for surveyors in Nebraska
- Still needed to provide for himself and wife
- No Social Security old-age pension

Decides to go surveying in dangerous Nebraska Indian country at age 60.

Getting the Surveying Contract

- December 1867 — Buck applies for the job to Nebraska State Surveyor General.

  Surveyor General rejects his application because of potential Indian problems.

- February 1868 — Buck applies a 2nd time and gets the job.

Buck's Reply to Surveyor General to Get Job

"As to the trouble with the Indians, I expected to encounter all ills. I am no more prepared to be killed than others are, but I think I am just as unlikely to suffer from their depredations as others, and am able to employ such force as will be likely to protect a party of surveyors as others are. In fact that part will not deter me from taking my chance.

It is not the profit alone that would induce me to make the attempt, but the desire to be employed where I can see the west, so then so far as the fear of Indians are concerned, that has little or no weigh in this matter."

Buck's Reply to Surveyor General to Get Job

"I can procure all the necessary assistants, and arms for defense as against the Indians and I can perform the work as well as any other man, as my long practice in surveying, I can say without fear of successful contradiction has given me a knowledge of all the various plans that must be carried out and I am anxious to be engaged in this business."

Newspaper Advertisement

- Buck took out local newspaper ad for the expedition
- Recruited young men for an Adventure out West
- Unfortunately, no copies of this 1869 ad still exist today

Pontiac Boys/Men in the Part

In McGregor's 1937 obituary, it recounted that a total of five young Pontiac men accompanied Nelson Buck to Nebraska.

1. Harry Buxton McGregor
2. John Nettleton
3. Frank McFarland
4. James Sager
5. Will McCullock

(Still discrepancies on who exactly went on the trip)

Pontiac Boys/Men in the Part

- The obituary reported the five boys and Nelson Buck left Pontiac on June 29, 1869, for Nebraska.

- The obituary also reported none of the five boys were over the age of 16.

- This is incorrect because John Nettleton was 20 and Harry McGregor was 17.

Last Communication from Nelson Buck

- July 21, 1869

- Went to Fort, asked for Army escort, guns, ammunition

- Army Commander refused all of Buck's requests

- Buck waited a couple of days at the Fort, then decided to leave and start surveying
  - -No money to get back home to Pontiac?

2 Pontiac Boys Sent back to the Fort for Help

- They saw Indians a couple days after they left the Fort
- Buck sent H. B. McGregor and John Nettleton back to the Fort to get help
- Army refused to send any help immediately
- 2 boys wisely decided to stay at the Fort
- 2 boys eventually traveled safely back to Pontiac

Army Knew on Sep. 26 Buck Party Killed

5th U.S. Cav.' Trs. B, C, and M, 2nd U.S. Cav.; and 2 companies of Pawnee scouts. Lieut. Col. Thos. Duncan, 5th U.S. Cav., in command. Indians killed, 1. Indians captured, 1.

Pursued the Indians to their village, consisting of 56 lodges, which was destroyed the following day. From the Indian prisoner it was ascertained that the band were all Sioux, under Pawnee Killer and Whistler. Some surveyor's instruments were also found and identified as belonging to Mr. Nelson Buck's surveying party, consisting of about 12 persons, all of whom have been recently murdered and their camp destroyed.

1st Newspaper Story Published Oct. 14, 1869

- An Omaha dispatch of the 16th says: Reports are received here that a government surveying party under Nelson Buck, numbering 12 men, was massacred about 50 miles south of Fort McPherson.

- The surveying instruments, tools, and a portion of the camp equipment owned by the party were found. The reports are credited but lack full confirmation.

Indian Squaw

- She reported that some white men attacked a scouting party and killed some Indians.

- The survivors of the scouting party went back to the main tribe

- The main tribe then wiped out the surveying party.

Her account not widely published.

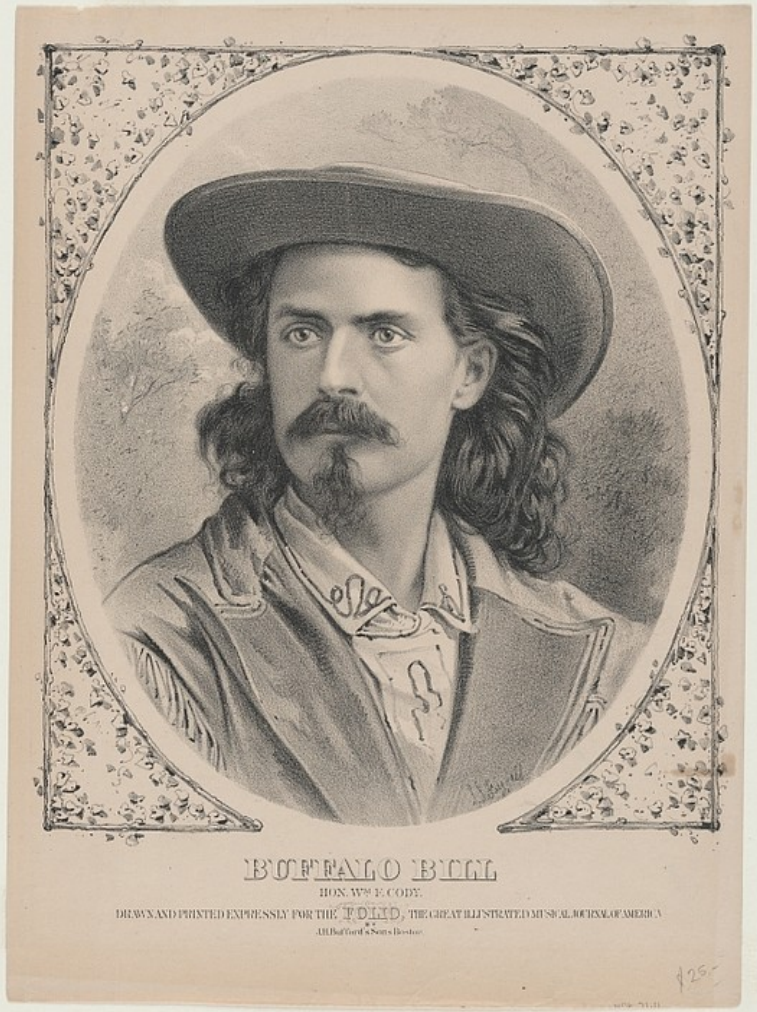
Her account not given much weight ??

Willard Buck's Trip to Nebraska

- Son of Nelson Buck went to massacre scene with Army
- Found some personal items of Nelson Buck
- Son concluded the whole party had been murdered, went back to Pontiac
- Wife of Nelson Buck went to Nebraska looking for husband.
  - -Rare copy of her letter from Nebraska to daughter in Pontiac found in Historical Society Archives

- Site of Nelson Buck Massacre near Marion, NE
- Many newspaper articles from McCook, NE

Buffalo Bill Cody enters the Story



- William Frederick Cody (February 26, 1846 to January 10, 1917), known as Buffalo Bill, was an American soldier, bison hunter, and showman.

Buffalo Bill Cody enters the Story

•One of the most famous and well-known figures of the American Old West, Cody started his legend when he was only 23. Shortly thereafter he started performing in shows that displayed cowboy themes and episodes from the frontier and Indian Wars.

•He founded **Buffalo Bill's Wild West** group in 1883, taking his large company on tours in the United States and, beginning in 1887, in Europe.

Buffalo Bill Cody enters the Story

- In April 1872, about 2.5 years after the massacre, he wrote letter to mother of Mrs. McFarlane, whose son was killed by the Indians

- Copy of his letter published in Pontiac Sentinel newspaper

Buffalo Bill Cody 1872 Letter to Mother

- He had investigated the massacre

- Criticized Willard Buck, son of Nelson Buck, for not continuing to search for his father's remains

- Once Willard saw a couple of his father's personal items, he gave up the search and went back to Pontiac

- Buffalo Bill told Willard he would continue investigating

Buffalo Bill Cody 1872 Letter to Mother

- He found a bend in the creek where the massacre happened

- He planned on returning to that area and promised to properly bury any remains he found

Buffalo Bill Cody 1881 Interview with Mother

- Mrs. McFarlane moved from Pontiac to Braidwood by 1880
- Buffalo Bill put on a show in Streator
- Mrs. McFarlane traveled to Streator to meet with Buffalo Bill
- He told her that about three years after the Massacre, while scouting the plains, he came upon the bleached bones of nine of the bodies, and had them carefully buried.

1909 Letter from Buffalo Bill Cody to Editor of the Pontiac Daily Leader

- The year 1909 marked 40 years since the Nelson Buck surveying party disappeared in 1869 in Nebraska

- Headline was…….

Says He Recovered the Bodies and All Were Given Respectable burial at Plum Creek, Nebraska

Key Details Revealed 67 Years after the Massacre

•In 1936, a Mr. A. M. Brookings of Hastings, Nebraska, researched the Nelson Buck expedition. Mr. Brooking exchanged letters with Harry McGregor in Pontiac, Illinois.

•In 1936, Harry McGregor was 85 years of age and was living in Pontiac. Harry's wife, Emma died on August 31, 1936. Since the Henry Buck expedition was in 1869, Harry was recalling events that occurred 67 years earlier.

•Harry died about 19 months after this article was published.

Key Details Revealed 67 Years after the Massacre

•Buck was in a quandary, he was told that in a country infested with hostile Indians it was suicide to go on but without funds and the, expense of caring for his party he had no ultimatum. It was a situation to daunt the stoutest of hearts.

•After about a week they decided to go on hoping that an escort of cavalry would follow. They traveled for two days finally reaching the Republican river near the present west edge of Harlan county.

•Sager and one of the McFarlane boys had openly boasted that they were going to shoot the first Indians they saw, and it was not long until they had the chance.

Key Details Revealed 67 Years after the Massacre

- The evening of their arrival at the Republican river these two boys went some distance from the camp where they met or overtook two Indians.

- One of these was promptly shot down by Sager but the other gun missed fire and the second Indian escaped.

- The bow, arrows, and other personal equipment was stripped from the corpse and taken into the Buck camp where they were exhibited.

Key Details Revealed 67 Years after the Massacre

- Buck was greatly disturbed by this happening for he was smart enough to know that this fool-hardy act might precipitate a world of trouble so he decided to send Nettleton and McGregor back to the fort to make a last plea for an escort or additional arms.

Unsolved Mysteries

Why did Nelson Buck want to go from Pontiac to survey in the dangerous country in Nebraska at the age of 59?

•When Nelson Buck wrote his first letter to the Nebraska Surveyor General requesting a surveying contract on December 27, 1867, he was 59 years old. When he got the contract and left Pontiac for Nebraska on June 29, 1869, Nelson Buck was 61 years old. In that era, most men that lived to be that age were content with working as long as they could or retire and enjoy their grandchildren.

Unsolved Mysteries

Why did Nelson Buck want to go from Pontiac to survey in the dangerous country in Nebraska at the age of 59?

- In one of Nelson Buck's letters to the Surveyor General, he said "It is not the profit alone that would induce me to make the attempt, but the desire to be employed where I can see the west."

- Maybe Nelson Buck knew his days were numbered and he wanted to have one last adventure before he died?

Unsolved Mysteries

Why did Harry B. McGregor not mention the detail about the Buck party first shooting at the Sioux until late in his life?

The author assumes the reason that H. B. McGregor never mentioned the Buck party initiated the conflict with the Sioux was because it made a better story to leave out this detail.

Unsolved Mysteries

Why Did Nelson Buck recruit young Pontiac boys to go on his Nebraska surveying expedition?

- They had no military training
- No experience with Native American conflicts

Why not Civil War veterans?

Closing Thoughts

•A very tragic story.

•Nelson Buck was a pioneer settler and surveyor in Peoria, Bloomington, and Pontiac, Illinois.

•He was a major contributor to the success of Pontiac growing and becoming a successful town.

•The young Pontiac men that he recruited to join his expedition were likely between the ages of 16 and 20. Except for John K. Nettleton and H. B. McGregor, these young men tragically lost their lives.

Closing Thoughts

- The Nebraska men who joined the expedition also tragically lost their lives.

- The true story of what happened after Nettleton and McGregor left the party to go back to the fort for help will likely never be known.

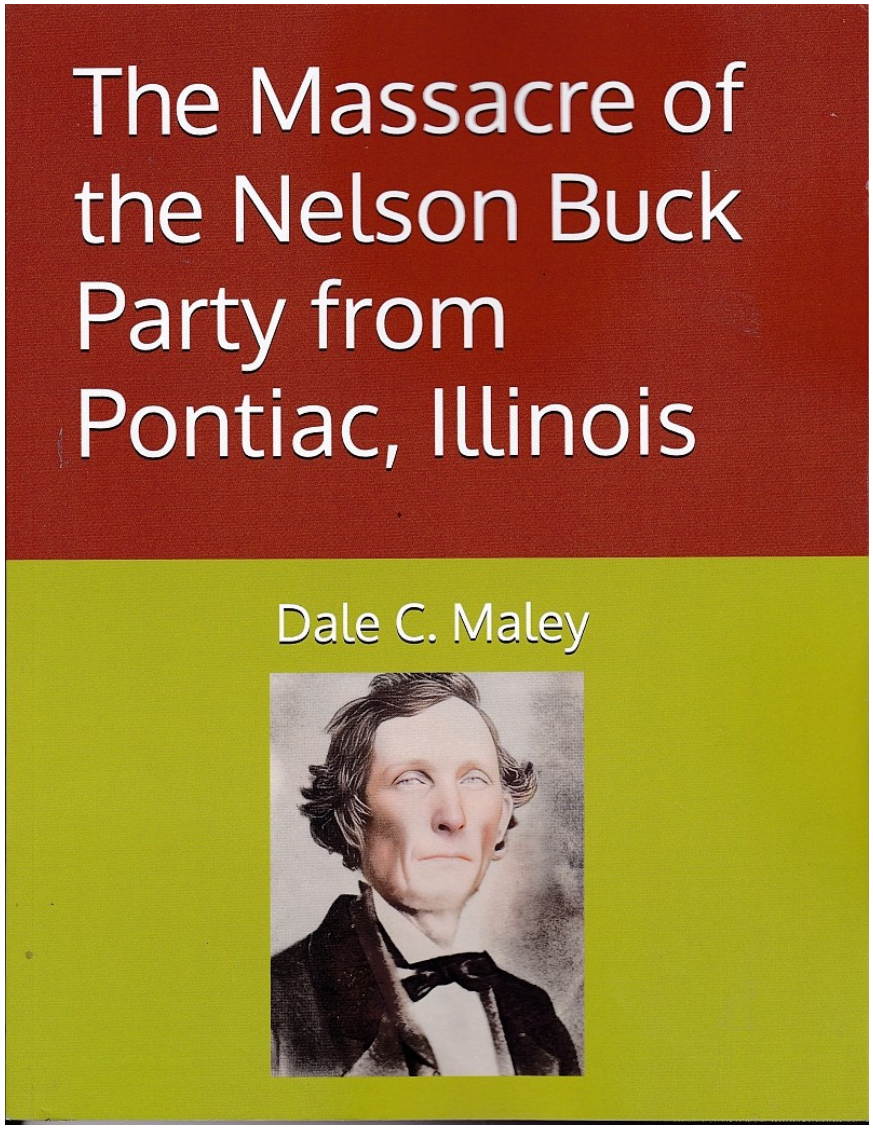
- Over 150 years after the incident, all we have is bits and pieces of information about the story.

Closing Thoughts

•In retrospect, the tragedy was likely caused because Nelson Buck was over-confident and he had no experience dealing with Native Americans.

•If Nelson Buck had really understood the risks of conflicts with Native Americans, he would have trained his young men not to initiate any conflicts.

•It is hoped the book will help to inform future generations about the history of the Nelson Buck surveying party in Nebraska in 1869.



- Available from Pontiac Library
- Available from Amazon.com
- Will keep some copies for sale at Strevell House

Questions?